

Congregational Church of the Messiah

July 6, 2008

“Growing in Faith”

Matthew 17:14-20

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Great beginnings are important for any person with a program and the power to influence the world.

When Jesus wanted to teach His disciples a lesson in healing and proclaiming God’s kingdom of love to more people, Jesus decided to do so when their faith in Him was high. The disciples’ confidence in Jesus’ power to heal was great, and they were eager to follow His example.

Therefore, Jesus gave the disciples the power to heal and preach. They went into the villages and towns preaching and healing. Their faith in the Person and Power of Jesus was great. In that faith they did mighty acts that gave them confidence—maybe even a little too much confidence.

When they returned to Jesus, they reported much success. However, as is often true, there was an exception.

The disciples were puzzled by their failure to heal a boy. A father from one of the villages brought his son to Jesus in front of the whole crowd and presented the problem. His son had a demonic spirit, and Jesus’ disciples had not cure him. Would the Master please heal the man’s son and return a right mind to him?

The father believed that even if the disciples did not have the power to heal, Jesus did. Jesus waited to give the disciples a reason why they could not heal the boy.

The distraught father had faith in Jesus. Perhaps the man’s faith was somewhat like the faith the disciples had at the beginning of the missionary program. The boy’s father believed Jesus was the source of compassion and power and so he came directly to the source and asked the Master to heal his son.

Jesus as a Person carried in Himself a complete and total faith in His heavenly Father’s power to fulfill whatever was asked in His Name on earth. Jesus healed the son, and when the crowds were gone, the disciples asked Him privately, “Why could we not heal the boy? What went wrong? What do You have that we did not? When You sent us out to the towns and villages, we did well. We healed. We preached. Everything was going smoothly. We believed in everything you told us, and we did everything just as you said. So why couldn’t we heal this boy?”

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The disciples had grown in their faith in Jesus being the Son of God. They had watched Him heal. They had listened to Him teach about God's love of each person, the lilies of the field, the sparrows, the lost and the lonely, the lame and comforting those that mourned.

When they went out, they were at a high point in their newfound faith in the Person of Jesus. Perhaps as they saw the success of their efforts, they began to think more highly of themselves and set aside thinking only of Jesus, their master teacher.

Perhaps they began to be so enamored with the success of the program of spreading the news and the healing that their focus and their words became less about believing in Jesus and more about following the disciples' teachings than of leading them to look directly to Jesus.

We do not know for sure.

Today we know that sometimes persons who are new to the Christian faith become so enthusiastic they lose focus. Their roots of faith are not deep in the ground of intellectual understanding and spiritual dedication to God. Sometimes they do not understand the dedication that deepens our faith as shown us by Jesus.

After Jesus had healed the boy, he turned to the disciples and answered their question without any embellishment attributing their inability to heal the boy:

“Because of your littleness of faith...” (Matthew 17:20)

I wonder why Jesus would tell the very men who had just come back from healing other diseases and proclaiming the coming of the Kingdom of God for Him that their faith was too small. Jesus himself had given them authority to heal and had sent them out. Except for this one boy, they apparently had been very successful! Therefore, they must already have had some faith to do the healing they had accomplished.

None of us is perfect. Our successes often are overshadowed by a small failure or mistake. One of today's popular authors says that when he reads his own published books, he sometimes finds a word, a sentence or a paragraph that he wishes he had written differently.

When we proclaim to be Christians, but our words and actions do not reflect the love and kindness Christ presented, people are turned off from believing in Christ and coming to church. They may even attribute our failure as an indication that the Christ cannot do what we claim He can do.

Each of us has a degree of faith in God.

When we decide to follow Jesus Christ, our trust in God increases.

We can choose to have more confidence in what God can do and accept the help He gives

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us in times of need. God can motivate us to do our part in bringing His Kingdom on earth.

In her devotion for Guild one month, a member reminded us of how God can speak through simple memorial roses that honor the lives of those who have gone before us. She spoke of how fresh flowers bring blessing and cheer in the Worship Service and in the hospital. Flowers springing forth in gardens or on a porch or balcony proclaim the joy of new life and beauty. Especially around the 4th of July, we see extra flowers and flags in cemeteries as people remember loved ones.

No matter how much faith or how little faith we have, God loves us as we are and never leaves us. Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in Me will do what I have been doing. And he will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father." (John 14:12)

To fulfill the potential that God has placed within each of us to do greater things than Jesus did, we must expand our faith when we are doing God's work for we know and trust God will fulfill this promise through us.

When the disciples went out to heal, their faith was narrowly focused on what they had seen and experienced in Jesus. As long as they were connected and filled with Jesus' Spirit, they could do the works that Jesus did.

The disciples' faith was intellectual understanding and physical experience rather than a personal spiritual relationship to God. The following analogy helps me come to a new understanding of the mustard seed scripture: Visualize each disciple with a bucket filled with water. The water represents the disciples' human understanding that Jesus was a great healer. They used a little water each time they healed and preached until finally they were feeling spiritually empty. Maybe they believed Jesus' power and ability to heal was automatically transferred to them and never needed to be replenished.

But they discovered that their faith in Jesus' power was not enough. They needed fasting and frequent, sincere prayer. What was needed was a more complete and direct relationship with God in their personal lives. They needed to come to the well of God's limitless grace, refill their souls, and renew their spiritual power.

The success of the outward acts of healing and preaching had taken the place of faith in the Person of Jesus Christ. The disciples' faith was narrowly defined. It was limited to their human minds and eyes and as such was far too small to contain the potential of the greatness of how God might choose to act in the world.

We cannot compare our faith with the greatness of God. Faith contains the potential for becoming strong even when it begins with questioning. Jesus likens the way even a small amount of faith in God grows like a small seed when planted, watered, and fed by the

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earth and warmed by the sun will push its way out of the darkness of the soil and grow upward toward to the sunlight. Protected and given time, that once small seed will mature, gradually change its size and become an entirely different form.

Each of us began with a small seed of faith, which grows upward toward the Light of Christ as we deepen our commitment to Him. As we grow, our height and shape take on different dimensions. Not only do we change physically, we also change spiritually and intellectually. God has hidden within every person an incredible potential to grow and develop, to take on different sizes and shapes in order to fulfill different purposes for His Kingdom here on earth.

Our faith may be strong at times, vibrant and glowing with God's love as the disciples' faith was when they left on their journey to the towns and villages. When our faith in God is strong, it makes us alert in mind, strong in expressions of kindness and sincere in our acceptance of others. And therefore, we are eager to express gratitude to God for His Presence in our lives.

But into the life of every saint, as well as every sinner, there come other times when the power behind the light of our faith seems to waver. The light flickers and in our weakened condition of faith we become afraid of falling away from God. We question our own faith and even why God would ever want to work His way through us.

If we trust God 50% of the way, we miss receiving all of the power and love God wants to give us.

Jesus' had 100% faith in His heavenly Father. God's active power and love were released in Jesus' life, death and Resurrection. The worst the world could do was defeated. Through Jesus' 100% trust in God, God has moved the hearts and minds of people in every generation. They have turned to God rather than rely on their own limited power to bring justice and healing to a broken, hurting world.

Sometimes God moves mountains through the faith and work of ordinary people like you and me. God expects us to pray and perhaps even to fast, so that our faith increases as we learn how to actualize more of the potential God has already placed within us.

God can work miracles through us at Messiah, just as He did with the disciples, just as He already has done in some of our lives. We are people of faith who continually need to pray and work to share the love of God in the world of today.

There were people of faith who gathered in a living room over 100 years ago who had confidence that God would work wonders using their commitment to Him. They dedicated themselves to work, worship and serve that future generations might worship here at Messiah.

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God is within and among us as we worship in the sanctuary this morning. We have experienced the truth of the scripture that says, “Where two or three are gathered in My Name there am I in the midst of them.” (Matthew 18:20) Whenever we gather in Christ’s Name and Spirit in the sanctuary, at the beach, on a mountaintop or by a swift running stream we can be sure that God is there.

We always can grow in faith and trust in God who keeps His promise to be with us always, even to the end of the world.

We practice our faith when we follow God’s lead with open ears and active minds. From careful listening, come faithful actions. God works through our faith giving us the courage, the strength and the joy of being co-workers with God in changing the world for the better.

Within us, as within a tiny seed, there is incredible potential for growing far beyond what we have seen or ever have experienced so far in our lives. God is not finished with any one of us and so our faith has not reached its full potential either.

Take heart then from this familiar scripture, “...if there is faith in you even as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move away from here,’ and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for you.” (Matthew 17:20)

Allow God to deepen and expand your faith with the assurance that everything is possible for God, and that what God promises, He is able to perform. There is no burden too heavy, no problem too great, or difficulty so entrenched that God cannot help you overcome it.

God specializes in things thought to be impossible. He’ll do for you what no other one can do.

Amen.